US attack inside Pakistan threatens dangerous new war

An expanded war

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A ground assault by US Special Forces troops on a Pakistani village on Wednesday threatens to expand the escalating Afghanistan war into its neighbour. Pakistan is already confronting a virtual civil war in its tribal border regions as the country's military, under pressure from Washington, seeks to crush Islamist militias supporting the anti-occupation insurgency inside Afghanistan.

The attack, which left up to 20 civilians dead, marks a definite escalation of US operations inside Pakistan. While US Predator drones and war planes have been used previously to bomb targets, Wednesday's raid was the first clear case of an assault by American ground troops inside Pakistani territory. The White House and Pentagon have refused to comment on the incident but various unnamed US officials have acknowledged to the media that the raid took place and indicated that there could be more to come.

The attack was unprovoked. US troops landed by helicopter in the village of Jalal Khei in South Waziristan at around 3 a.m. and immediately targetted three houses. The engagement lasted for about 30 minutes and left between 15 and 20 people dead, including women and children.

A US official acknowledged to CNN that there may have been women and children in the immediate vicinity but when the mission began "everyone came out firing from the compound". Even this flimsy justification for a naked act of aggression is probably a lie. "It was very terrible as all of the residents were killed while asleep," a villager Din Mohammad told the Pakistan-based *International News.*

The newspaper provided details of the dead and injured: nine family members of Faujan Wazir, including four women, two children and three men; Faiz Mohammad Wazir, his wife and two other family members; and Nazar Jan and his mother. Two other members of Nazar Jan's family were seriously wounded.

The US and international media have described the Angoor Adda area around the village as "a known stronghold of the Taliban and Al Qaeda" but offered no evidence to support the claim. A villager, Jabbar Wazir, told the *International News*: "All of those killed were poor farmers and had nothing to do with the Taliban."

In comments to the *International Herald Tribune*, a senior Pakistani official branded the raid a "cowboy action" that had failed to capture or kill any senior Al Qaeda or Taliban leader. "If they had gotten anyone big, they would be bragging about it," he commented.

The attack has provoked outrage in Pakistan. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry issued a statement branding the attack as "a gross violation of Pakistan territory" and summoned US ambassador Anne Patterson to provide an explanation. North West Frontier Province (NWFP) governor Owais Ahmed Ghani declared that "the people expect that the armed forces of Pakistan would rise to defend the sovereignty of the country". He put the number killed at 20.

Pakistani military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas said the raid was "completely counterproductive" and risked provoking an uprising even among those tribesmen who have previously supported the army's operations in the border areas.

The *International News* reported: "Angry villagers later blocked the main road between Pakistan and Afghanistan in Angoor Adda by placing the bodies of their slain tribesmen on the road. They chanted slogans against the US and NATO military authorities for crossing the border without any provocation and killing innocent people."

The US raid has compounded the political crisis inside Pakistan, where the selection of a new president is due to take place tomorrow. The ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has been engaged in a delicate balancing act—continuing to support US demands for a crackdown by the Pakistani military along the border with Afghanistan, while trying to defuse widespread anger and fend off accusations that it is a US puppet.

Reaffirming his support for the Bush administration's bogus "war on terror", PPP presidential candidate Asif Ali

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Zardari declared in a column in yesterday's *Washington Post*: "We stand with the United States, Britain, Spain and others who have been attacked." Zardari went on to promise that he would ensure that Pakistani territory would not be used to launch raids on US and NATO forces inside Afghanistan.

However, as PPP spokesman Farhatullah Babar explained, the US attack was politically compromising. "We have been very clear that any action on this side of the border must be taken by Pakistani forces themselves," he told the Associated Press. "It is very embarrassing for the government. The people will start blaming the government of Pakistan."

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The decision to launch Wednesday's attack was undoubtedly taken at the top levels of the White House and Pentagon. As the *New York Times* reported in articles earlier this year, a high-level debate has been taking place in Washington over the use of US Special Forces inside Pakistan as well as the intensification of existing CIA operations, which include Predator missile strikes.

A meeting in early January involved Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen and top national security and intelligence officials advisers. According to the *New York Times* on January 6, options discussed included "loosening restrictions on the CIA to strike selected targets in Pakistan" and operations involving US Special Operations forces, such as the Navy Seals.

The *Times* reported on January 27 that then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf rejected proposals put by US Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and CIA Director Michael Hayden for an expanded American combat presence in Pakistan, either through covert CIA missions or joint operations with Pakistani security forces. While apparently accepting the refusal, the US intensified pressure on Pakistan to bring its border areas under control.

As the anti-occupation insurgency has expanded in Afghanistan, claiming a growing number of US and NATO casualties, Pakistan has become a convenient scapegoat. Washington has repeatedly accused the Pakistani military of failing to suppress Islamist militia and alleged that Pakistani military intelligence is actively supporting anti-US guerrillas inside Afghanistan.

Admiral Mullen has held five meetings since February with his Pakistani counterpart, army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, to press for tougher action. The most recent took place last weekend aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, stationed in the Arabian Sea. In comments to CNN, a US official "declined to say" whether there were any new agreements for US troops to operate inside Pakistani airspace or on the ground to attack Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Whether the Pakistani military quietly approved Wednesday's attack or not, the Bush administration is making clear that it intends to extend the war into Pakistan. Citing top American officials, the *New York Times* reported on Wednesday that the raid "could be the opening salvo in a much broader campaign by Special Operations forces against the Taliban and Al Qaeda inside Pakistan, a secret plan that Defence Secretary Robert Gates has been advocating for months within President George W. Bush's war council".

This utterly reckless policy, which risks the eruption of a US war against Pakistan, is bipartisan in character. In fact, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has repeatedly declared his support for broadening the "war on terror" through unilateral US attacks on insurgents based inside Pakistan. His candidacy has been strongly backed by sections of the US establishment that have been critical of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq for undermining US interests. Far from opposing aggressive US military action, Obama has become the political vehicle for shifting its focus to Afghanistan and Pakistan as the means of advancing US strategic interests in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

The US attack on the village of Jalal Khei is another demonstration that the shift in policy, with all its potentially catastrophic consequences, is already underway.

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